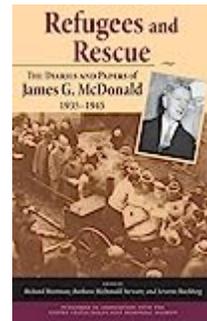




Richard Breitman, Barbara McDonald Stewart, Severin Hochberg, eds.
Refugees and Rescue: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald, 1935-1945. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. x + 359 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35307-8.



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James G. McDonald, Roosevelt, and the Holocaust

Those who have studied America's response to the Holocaust know James G. McDonald as a person who, despite his earnest desire to help European Jewish refugees during the 1930s and WWII, achieved precious little. Whether as the League of Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees or, later, as chairman of the President's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees, the mild-mannered McDonald did not exhibit the energy or determination needed to overcome obstacles that the Roosevelt administration and other governments placed in his path. Unfortunately he was not effective in either position.

The McDonald family's presentation of his private diaries to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2003, however, has brought McDonald back to life in a form that some historians may have difficulty recognizing. The McDonald of Prof. Haim Genizi's pioneering study in the Wiener Library Bulletin in 1977, the one whom Genizi concluded did not "emerge as a person of great stature ... he was too cautious in negotiation with

governments ... he never fought strongly enough to get his way," is gone.[1] The McDonald whom the U.S. Holocaust Museum is now presenting to the public is "James G. McDonald, An American Hero," as the museum's 2005 James McDonald Wall Calendar characterized him.

The "heroic" McDonald is the star of *Advocate for the Doomed: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald 1932-1935*, published two years ago, and the newly published *Refugees and Rescue: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald 1935-1945*, both edited by Richard Breitman, Barbara McDonald Stewart and Severin Hochberg, and published by Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

It is one thing to recognize McDonald as "a shrewd observer" of events in the 1930s—as the dustjacket of the first volume accurately characterized him—or to note that McDonald "interacted with a stunning array of historical figures"—as the Holocaust Museum's director wrote, cor-

rectly, in her blurb for the second volume. It is quite another to turn him into a “hero” who did something more concrete than “observe” or “interact.” That, however, is precisely what the editors of the McDonald diaries have tried to do. From a public relations point of view, they may have succeeded to a degree. From a scholarly point of view, they have failed.

One can understand the temptation to make the most of a newly discovered diary pertaining to America’s response to the 1930s and WWII Jewish refugee crisis. After more than forty years of research in the field, such discoveries are rare indeed. While McDonald was certainly no mover or shaker, his contacts with key political and diplomatic figures yielded some interesting nuggets, which surfaced from time to time in the eight-hundred-page first volume, *Advocate for the Doomed*.

With the second volume, however, the editors faced a serious problem: in early 1936, McDonald stopped writing in his diary (apparently he resumed after the war, however, so a third volume is assured). Thus *Refugees and Rescue: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald 1935-1945* is a diary only until page 118, hardly enough to constitute a book. The editors added another 200-plus pages by presenting letters to and from McDonald and excerpts from documents, some of which mention him and some of which do not. As a consequence, the narrative is uneven. But that is the least of the book’s problems.

Of far greater consequence is the story that the diaries and assorted documents tell. A few hundred pages of significant achievements by McDonald, however irregular in style, would certainly have constituted a worthwhile volume. Instead, the reader faces a few hundred pages of unrealized proposals, obstructed projects, and shattered hopes. The “refugees” cited in the book’s title abound, but the “rescue” to which it refers is painfully absent. McDonald pleads for U.S. financial support of refugee resettlement; Roosevelt promises to ask Congress for \$150 million, but never does so. McDonald looks for modest-sized, practical resettlement projects; FDR insists on grandiose postwar resettlement schemes that are useless to the Jews under Hitler’s heel. McDonald begs for visas for handfuls of Jewish refugees to enter the United States; hundreds of thousands of quota places from Germany and (later) Axis territory sit unused.

To make matters worse, as *Refugees and Rescue* progresses, the events seem to involve McDonald less and less. The authors go so far as to include a section on the

resettlement of thousands of Jewish refugees in Bolivia in the 1930s, although the link between McDonald and the Bolivia project is so incidental that he is barely even mentioned in this part of the book.

In lieu of sufficient evidence to substantiate the museum’s characterization of McDonald as a “hero,” the book’s editors and their publicists seem to have found another hero: Franklin Roosevelt. The headline of a press release circulated to promote the new book declared that “[N]ew Evidence Challenges Widely Held Opinions about FDR’s Views on the Rescue of European Jews Prior to the Holocaust.” In the conclusion to *Refugees and Rescue*, the lead editor, Prof. Breitman, writes: “[W]e have uncovered some key episodes in changing American refugee policies previously overlooked.... President Roosevelt promised McDonald and George Warren, under the right circumstances, to ask Congress to appropriate \$150 million to help resettle refugees in various parts of the world” (p. 335).

The episodes Breitman and his colleagues claim to have “uncovered” were not “previously overlooked.” They were described in, among other works, David S. Wyman’s *Paper Walls* (1968) and Henry Feingold’s *The Politics of Rescue* (1970). McDonald did not succeed in “changing American refugee policies”; indeed, the Roosevelt administration’s intransigence was the main problem. Roosevelt’s statement to McDonald and Warren about raising \$150 million may or may not have constituted a “promise,” but in any event he did not fulfill it; he never asked Congress to appropriate funds to resettle refugees. Finally, the term “under the right circumstances” is an elastic loophole that in effect cancels out the rest of that “promise,” for when it came to FDR and the Jews, “the right circumstances” never arrived.

One of the few aspects of *Refugees and Rescue* that may legitimately be described as new is the documentation showing that by the autumn of 1939 McDonald was deeply disillusioned over the contrast between President Roosevelt’s lofty rhetoric and his failure to take practical steps to advance resettlement. *Refugees and Rescue* thus ends up confirming what four decades of scholars have already documented concerning Roosevelt’s failed response to the Holocaust.

Note

[1]. Haim Genezi, “James G. McDonald High Commissioner for Refugees, 1933-1935,” *Wiener Library Bulletin* 30, new series nos. 43/44 (1977): 51.

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